

The Challenge of Diversity and Choice

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by Charles Glenn

More than twenty years ago, an urban superintendent in Massachusetts lamented to me that he was being asked to encourage differences among the schools in his district. For decades he had sought to ensure that all the schools in his district were as similar as possible, that it wouldn't matter where a student was assigned. Now, to help parents choose out-of-neighborhood schools and thus facilitate voluntary racial integration, he was being asked in the name of "educational equity" to undo what he had devoted his career to doing—also in the name of educational equity. Wouldn't helping schools become distinctive create new inequalities and injustices? he asked.

It was a good question—one that I found myself answering frequently in twenty-one years of directing the state's educational-equity efforts. On the one hand, I told administrators, educators should work to eliminate differences in educational quality, as measured both by inputs of schooling (the training and experience of teachers, for example, and the quality of facilities and other resources) and by outputs of instruction (performance on standardized tests, persistence in education). Those battles are far from won, even after the past thirty or forty years of massive spending and other efforts in the name of equal educational opportunity. In particular, the gap in educational effectiveness among schools in different communities is inexcusably large—in fact, larger than in other Western democracies with diverse populations.

On the other hand, schools of equal educational quality need not be identical, and the recent trend toward increased choice and diversity in American schooling has if anything made the system more equitable for children who previously had no choice but to attend poorly performing schools. That is not to say that all forms of school choice are good public policy: as I will suggest, choice can have positive or negative effects, depending upon the policy framework that guides it.

First, though, a quick overview of what I mean by choice and diversity: In 1970, when I began my career as a state education official,

American public schools varied widely in both quality and curricula, but it was essentially an unacknowledged variation, the guilty secret behind what I would later call “the myth of the common school.” In most cases, local officials assigned students to public schools according to where they lived. Parents dissatisfied with assignments often enrolled their children in tuition-charging private schools (if they lived in a city, usually Roman Catholic schools) or moved to different districts; in a few cases local policies allowed them to transfer their children on a space-available basis. (In fact, when my division of the Massachusetts Department of Education set out to achieve racial desegregation of the Boston public schools, it found that some 7,000 white students had taken advantage of open enrollment to flee their neighborhood schools in racially changing parts of the city.)

By contrast, parents and students in Boston today can access a bewildering menu of educational opportunities. There are now numerous moderately priced private schools, either non-Roman Catholic or non-sectarian and nonreligious (although fewer Roman Catholic schools are available). More significant, there is a choice process for public school enrollment. Parents indicate their school preferences through parent information centers, and school assignments seek to fulfill those preferences, with random selection for oversubscribed schools.

The first such methods of “controlled choice,” pioneered in Cambridge and then adopted in a dozen other Massachusetts cities, were intended not only to increase racial and social class integration but also to allow the staff of each school to develop distinctive educational identities that would satisfy some parents very much rather than barely satisfy many. Nonetheless, policymakers and parents soon discovered that the inflexibility of the school systems limited the schools’ distinctiveness. Thus Massachusetts (like two-thirds of all states) adopted charter school legislation that has fostered dozens of new public schools, each



approved by the state for its distinctive approach. In response, the Boston Public Schools adopted its own program of distinctive pilot schools freed from some local requirements and went on to break up high schools into smaller units, each with its own flavor and mission.

My oldest grandson, whose family lives in Boston, entered first grade this fall; his parents spent months considering all the alternatives available. Elsewhere, many parents have even more alternatives, including cyberschools, whose students never meet their teachers or one another, and in three states voucher programs, with others on the way.

Americans have good reason to welcome this evolution, though there are dangers. Those who urge expanded parental choice in U.S. schools advance four primary arguments; most advocates employ all four, though generally one or another is emphasized:

1. The liberty to shape the education of one's children through school choice is a fundamental matter guaranteed by international human rights covenants.
2. Publicly funded school choice is especially a matter of justice for poor parents because more-affluent parents already have their choice of schools.
3. Market pressures, freedom from bureaucracy, and the opportunity to focus on a clearly defined mission will make schools more effective educationally.
4. Variety in the forms of schooling is inherently a good thing, given that pupils have differing strengths and needs and respond well to different approaches—the implication, after all, of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences.

Correspondingly, four primary arguments are raised against school choice—usually without mentioning the ways in which choice threatens the educational status quo.

1. School choice may lead to increased racial and social class segregation.
2. Choice will lead to (further) degradation of the public educational system (or, in the case of choice limited to public schools, to the schools that are already least successful), and thus to inferior education for those who do not participate.
3. Choice will lead to new injustices since the poor will not be able to participate on equal terms.
4. Choice will lead to Balkanization of American society and further conflict by exposing various groups to divisive influences, rather than the socialization provided by the common public school.

Most thoughtful advocates of expanded school choice concede—certainly I do—that all those possibilities are real and serious unless choice is organized effectively, and some thoughtful opponents concede that it is possible to organize choice to prevent negative effects. The dispute often, therefore, comes down to whether the positive effects of choice can be enjoyed and the negative ones prevented once choice is widely available.

Several years ago Joe Nathan of the University of Minnesota and I, longtime allies in working for school reform, spent a day together identifying our agreements and disagreements about parental choice of schools. Dr. Nathan opposes supporting religious schools with public funds (either directly or with vouchers), funding single-sex schools, and allowing schools to set admissions requirements related to their educational mission; I support all three under some circumstances. The result was agreement on the principles any acceptable school choice policy must reflect (see accompanying table).

A Model School Choice Policy

School choice must:

- a. Provide better education for poor children and more effective involvement for their parents (the bottom-line criterion for judging whether a school choice policy is acceptable)
- b. Provide for more accountability for validly measurable educational outcomes than now provided by public schooling based upon a local monopoly
- c. Be based upon clear standards for the educational outcomes that every pupil should achieve at every level in order to participate effectively in our society, political order, and economy
- d. Forbid discrimination in admission to schools, or in employment at those schools, on the basis of race
- e. Make effective provision for outreach to parents, especially low-income and language-minority parents, to ensure that they are well informed about the choices available and how those can be matched with the strengths, needs, and interests of their children, and with their own hopes and beliefs about education

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A Model School Choice Policy *(continued)*

- f. Ensure that geography and the availability of affordable housing do not prevent low-income families from having access to the full range of opportunities, including help with transportation
- g. Ensure that no participating school lacks adequate safeguards for treating pupils and teachers fairly and respectfully
- h. Ensure that the interests of pupils with special needs, limited proficiency in English, or other conditions requiring additional assistance are met adequately and, so far as possible, while safeguarding their parents' opportunity to make choices about their education
- i. Ensure that the resources available to pupils in different schools—teachers and other staff as well as facilities and materials—are adequate and are not based upon their parents' wealth
- j. Bar the participation of schools that teach hatred or disrespect for any racial, religious, ethnic, or sexual group
- k. Ensure that there are real choices available and that meeting the criteria listed above does not impose a drab uniformity of curriculum, school life, or teaching style
- l. Ensure autonomy to make staffing and budgetary decisions at the school level (in order to protect the distinctive character of schools among which parents can choose, based upon clarity of mission and a shared understanding of education)
- m. Ensure that reform efforts are applied in a context in which any school that receives public funding, including a "regular" public school, bears the same responsibility as charter schools either to improve its educational results (as measured by standardized tests and other valid indicators over a three- to five-year period) or to be closed

It will be obvious from this extensive list that neither of us is a libertarian, willing to "let the market rip" or "let the devil take the hindmost." Instead, though we differ on whether some forms of educational diversity, such as schools with a religious character, should be eligible for public support, we agree that school choice should operate within a solid framework of policies and public accountability to ensure that all children benefit.

This article could go on at length about what form policies friendly to parental choice should take: just last year I published, with a European colleague, a two-volume study of how twenty-six different countries have regulated the provision of schooling in order to balance school autonomy and public accountability. Here, however, I'd like to warn of a danger that can be addressed effectively only by educators, not by government. A painstakingly designed system of public school diversity and choice might allow teachers and other educators to design the schools of their dreams and allow parents to choose among those schools based on solid information about each, all within a framework of protection and accountability—yet the resulting schools might largely prove uninspired carbon copies produced by educators lacking the foggiest idea of how to do anything differently.

I first contemplated that possibility in the late 1980s, when the Boston Public Schools' new "controlled choice" policy required schools to attract pupils without relying on attendance zones to provide a guaranteed clientele. Each school had unprecedented flexibility to redesign its programs and to use external funding to support its distinctive mission. Any school that was not attracting enough applications received generous paid planning time after school and over the summer, as well as a budget for outside consultants of its choosing, to develop attractive programs. A state-federal task force I headed scoured the country for alternative models of effective urban education that schools could adopt.

In some cases, the response from individual teachers or from whole groups of teachers was gratifying, and many schools underwent significant changes. In most cases, though, teachers were reluctant to identify meaningful aspects of the school that required change: "more parking for the teachers" was the only result of one school's planning process! In some cases, the action plans were concerned more with improving the image of the schools than with improving their instructional programs.

There is probably a more basic issue, too: public schools have long practiced a sort of defensive teaching designed not to offend any parent—in effect, "the bland leading the bland." As my book *The Myth of the Common School* shows, urban public schools with large immigrant enrollments came under pressure in the 1850s to remove textbooks that offended Roman Catholics; in the 1970s, my office required every school district in Massachusetts to review all its materials for "sex-role stereotyping" and any failure to reflect the diversity of American society. The courts are frequently the first resort of parents offended by this or that their children experience in school.

Such concerns are often legitimate, and a system of mandatory schooling must be extremely careful not to indoctrinate children or offend their consciences. But the cumulative impact upon public

schools has too often led to lowest-common-denominator education, so apprehensive of offending anyone that it fails to engage students in their own education or to expose them to the strongly held and well-argued positions that could provide them with models as they develop their own—often very different—convictions.

That, I suggest, is an additional reason we should do everything possible to develop schools that are truly distinctive—not simply different in some superficial way, but distinctive because the individuals who work in them share a clear set of educational ideas that will ordinarily be based upon a common understanding of human nature and the goals of human development.¹ That characteristic, more than any organizational arrangement, is surely the reason for the repeatedly documented effectiveness of Roman Catholic schools in educating African-American youth and, in other countries, for the similar effectiveness of schools with a clearly defined educational mission.

By the same token, educators are free to create such distinctive schools only if well-informed parents are free to choose or reject them. The more that such schools come into existence, the more that prospective parents will need accurate, reliable information about each school's educational criteria. Yet even the best-designed system of parental choice, with all the bells and whistles of accountability, parent information, and protections against discrimination, will prove ineffective not only if it lacks significant choices but also if they are made (as happens all too often) according to socioeconomic status or to minority enrollments. School choice promotes equity only if it provides parents with better reasons than those to choose a particular school.

It is by no means necessary that the distinctive school's mission be religious, though I suppose that every coherent way of understanding the world is in some sense religious, but its mission must be more than a bag of tricks picked up here and there and lacking any common theme. Kieran Egan has written,

It's not the lack of a research base of knowledge about development and learning that is hindering educators' wider success; rather, our main problem is our poverty in conceptions of education. . . . It is always easier and more attractive to engage in technical work under an accepted paradigm than do hard thinking about the value-saturated idea of education.²

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I want to challenge those who would improve American public education to "hard thinking about the value-saturated idea of education." If we are to have schools that are distinctively excellent, we must have

schools that are different because of hard thinking, thinking that grapples with complicated and delicate questions.

Too much discussion among educators is about how to do things; not nearly enough is about what is worth doing. We are afraid that we will discover basic disagreements, and that it will be impossible for us to work together. But it is precisely around those basic disagreements that—always courteously, always respectfully—we can build a diverse educational system.

Am I proposing that we abandon the goal of a common school that can meet the needs of every student and that teaches them to appreciate one another? Yes and no. Certainly it is past time that we recognize that no one school can be good for every student or satisfy every parent, and we can no longer assume that involuntary assignments, which thirty years of experience have proved ineffective, are the only means of achieving racial and other forms of integration in schools. Instead, we should be seeking what, in one of my annual reports to the Massachusetts Board of Education, I called the “new common school”: the school freely chosen by parents and by teachers and, as a result, free to translate a shared vision of education into the thousand details of classroom and school life. Such a policy allows schools to function within a policy framework that stresses outcomes and leaves the ways and means up to those most directly engaged with the process of education and the lives of individual children and youth. As noted earlier, Massachusetts and other states have begun to implement such a framework, with accountability for results and increased autonomy at the school level.

The recent evidence shows that there is still a long way to go. Around the country, constraints—all sorts of limits upon the freedom of charter schools and others to organize instruction, staffing, and accountability—are creeping back. My challenge to those who would improve American public education, though, involves more than technical adjustments at the margins of school choice, however important that task may be. The true challenge is in undertaking what policymakers can only permit and encourage: developing models of educational effectiveness that embrace Egan’s “hard thinking about the value-saturated idea of education.” Real education will always involve helping to form the person; it will always be “value-saturated” and rest upon consequential choices no research design can make. Parents, educators, and policymakers alike need to rediscover the distinction, so much more emphasized in other languages, between “instruction” and “education”: consider the resonance of the words *Bildung* in German, or *éducation* in French, describing the lifelong enterprise of becoming a fully realized human being. Those called “educators” should recognize the moral weight of that

description; Horace Mann said that the teacher at his desk has a calling more sacred than the minister in his pulpit. Do we dare think of ourselves in that way? Do we dare take our calling any less seriously?

It will require imagination and a willingness to think through the implications of different means of teaching and of organizing schools and curricula—thinking based, though, not on mere technical efficiency, but on how such means correspond to and advance a coherent vision of education.

Doing so will lead us—will lead you—along different paths, often parallel, sometimes crossing, at other times diverging widely. It is essential that you not lose nerve because of those differences simply because someone you respect reaches different conclusions about how, and why, education should be provided. It is the richness and the promise of the present moment in education that we are free to create distinctive schools—each a “common school” for those who choose it—without fear that we are somehow betraying the mission of schooling in a democracy.

Free and distinctive schools, created by the hard thinking and hard work of imaginative educators, will not betray the mission of democratic education, but will rather fulfill it as never before in American life.

Notes

1. See Gary R. Galluzzo, “Moving to the Margins,” *Educational Horizons* 82:4 (Summer 2004), for a discussion of the school as “a school of thought.”
2. Kieran Egan, *Getting It Wrong from the Beginning* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002): 180f.

Charles Glenn, the author of The Myth of the Common School, served for two decades as the Massachusetts state education official responsible for urban education. He was selected to write the article on school choice in the International Encyclopedia of Education (2nd Edition).